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ABSTRACT

It is asserted that under the influence of curriculum developers, R&D disseminators, and general cultural influences, teachers of young children perceive that part of their role is to keep their children excited (high level of responsiveness) or "turned on." This perception leads to (1) child dependence on and expectation of adult-induced excitement; (2) absence of opportunity for children to learn to engage in sustained work; and (3) teacher reliance on superficial tricks and gimmicks. Similarly, teachers are victims of disseminator induced excitement. It is asserted that excitement cannot last and is followed by disconsolation and mistrust of educational R&D disseminators. (Author)

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NOTES ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND EXCITEMENT

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NOTES ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND EXCITEMENT

Lilian G. Katz

Recently when I visited an early childhood program, a sign on the classroom bulletin board caught my attention. The sign listed instructional pointers for the teaching staff. One item on the list was: "Keep it fun. Make it exciting for both you and the children!" This injunction to keep children excited, or to "make learning exciting" seems to represent a common confusion between what is educative and what is exciting. To some extent this confusion applies to strategies of innovation and change in education as well.

What is Excitement?

For the purposes of this discussion, let us assume that each individual has an average, characteristic, or typical (for him) level of activity or responsiveness. Some specialists refer to this responsiveness as level of activation (see Nowlis, 1970), or as arousal (Ellis, 1969), and some refer to it as the "rate of stimulation or neural firing" (Tomkins, 1970). For this discussion we are referring to the typical day-to-day responsiveness, activity and involvement which may characterize an individual when he is neither excited nor depressed. In Figure 1, this normal level of activity for any given individual is represented by line A. Now let us introduce into the environment of this hypothetical individual an event which he experiences as exciting (indicated at point B in Figure 1). At this point the individual's level of responsiveness goes up, and when it has reached point C, we say that he is excited. In current terminology we say that he is "turned on." Now let us consider some of the implications of "turning on" children and adults.

Implications of Excitement for Children

By definition, excitement is an extraordinary level of responsiveness, activity or arousal. Therefore, it cannot be maintained without becoming in turn the new ordinary level. It seems reasonable to assume that the high level of responsiveness must "come down." How long the excitement period lasts, or how quickly the individual returns to his own normal level of responsiveness probably varies widely among and within individuals as well as situations.

My hunch is that an individual--whether child or adult--may not just simply come down to his own normal state, but that he may fall below his own normal level of responsiveness. Although it is difficult to know for sure, I am hypothesizing that in this period (indicated by point D on Figure 1), some children may become depressed, and some may withdraw from interaction completely. Other children may appear to "fall apart" and others to be satiated. On such occasions we are likely to define a child's irritability or behavior disorganization as overtiredness.

It may be that when given sufficient rest from an exciting environment a child spontaneously recovers his own normal level of responsiveness. But another possibility is that adult-induced excitement teaches children to expect and/or depend upon repeated "doses" of it administered to them in their classrooms. Point E in Figure 1 indicates the administration of another "dose"--perhaps necessarily a stronger dose than at point B. In this sense, teachers' belief that their pupils should be excited or "turned on" leads to an addiction pattern: when the first effect wears off, another, possibly stronger, dose must be introduced. Such an addiction pattern could lock both teachers and their pupils into exhausting patterns of activities and relationships. A more important consequence of this pattern is that it may rob children of the opportunity to develop and strengthen their own capacities for generating interesting, productive

or stimulating activities on their own. In other words, they may acquire a need to be entertained or "turned on" by others.

Implications of Excitement for Teachers

It seems to me that if teachers believe that they must keep their pupils excited, they must develop sets of activities which are not much more than cheap gimmicks of superficial or fleeting interest and value. In so many classrooms one sees the products of one-shot, one-time activities displayed on shelves and bulletin boards. These activities may have been fun and exciting for their brief duration. But I am suggesting that a major index of good quality, i.e. that which is educative, in a program (for young children) is work and/or play which invites or requires the children's sustained interest and involvement. Educative activities for young children are those which require some planning, problem-solving or construction (at developmentally appropriate levels) which can be sources of satisfaction and pleasure rather than excitement and fun.

Certainly some educative activities are fun and exciting as well. Sesame Street is an example of an entertainment program which may be instructive as well as exciting for young children. Many of the standard activities of nursery schools are also fun: finger-painting, lotto games, climbing on outdoor equipment, rhythm and dancing activities. But these are all activities of relatively momentary quality. The kind of sustained involvement and interest which seem to be educative can be illustrated in these activities seen in a crowded nursery school for three to five-year-old children:

> A small group of children who had started playing one day with doctors' and nurses' dress-up outfits decided to add a hospital bed, several doctors' instruments and (doll) patients. Then they made (sewed) a burlap stretcher and constructed and painted an ambulance large enough for two children to sit in the driver's cabin (complete with an old steering wheel), and for one or two children to attend the patients in the back. This activity had developed over a period of a few weeks.

> On the same morning I saw a complex activity centered around a cement truck the children had constructed from old lumber. The truck was large enough for four children to ride in, climb in and out of, and deliver sacks of cement to other children who were building a structure (also large enough to enter). This building was constructed with bricks the children made from pairs of egg cartons glued together so that their flat sides were exposed.
>
> A group of children worked for several days on sewing stuffed dolls. Some were painting portraits of the dolls they had made. Two children were constructing replicas of their respective cats and dogs from cartons larger than themselves. The cat was painted orange and white; the head moved from side to side (and displayed ample whiskers); and the young artist proudly informed the observer that she had also made the cat food resting at his feet. Several children were adding details to the row houses they had constructed from small cartons. Their houses reflected the typical construction of their own neighborhoods; some included windows, doors, chimneys and furniture. Some children had added trays of dirt as front gardens and in these gardens were (paper) trees and one swing set made from popsicle sticks.

Many other activities, which involved planning, problem solving, and construction and invited children's sustained involvement, were also seen during that one morning. These children did not seem to be excited or turned-on. They did seem to be deeply involved and interested in reconstructing salient aspects of their own experiences and environments. In their analysis of the Open Education approach used by the Education Development Center (EDC, Newton, Massachusetts) advisors, Bussis and Chittenden (1970) pointed out that:

> EDC advisors are less impressed with the teacher who understands and can capture interest for periods of time than they are with the teacher who brings out in children the sort of interests that underlie sustained involvement in learning. In a good classroom the observer would undoubtedly see both the 'captured' and the sustaining interests, but the emphasis would be on the latter (pp. 16-17).

It is tempting here to suggest that the emphasis on selecting activities should be on making them interesting rather than exciting. But the term "interest" is as fraught with semantic pitfalls as are the terms "excitement" and "education" (see Peters, 1967, pp. 91-102). Getzels defined an interest as "a characteristic disposition, organized through experience, which impels

an individual to seek out particular objects, activities, skills, understandings, or goals for attention and acquisition" (1969, p. 470). Activities which foster and strengthen this disposition seem to me to be educative; activities which strengthen children's dependence on adult-induced excitement seem to undermine or inhibit the development of this disposition. It may be that teacher-imposed or television-induced excitement, or the ubiquitous one-shot, short term activities offered young children, encourages the disposition to be a consumer or spectator, at best; thrill-seeker or psychological drop out, at worst.

Another way of looking at the problem is that while excitement may originally have been thought of as a means by which to launch children into educative activities, it has inadvertently become an end in itself. Another point is that learning of significant skills, ideas and concepts takes time. Trivial skills and facts can be learned quickly. Perhaps length of time required for learning is related to resistance to extinction of the same. Excitement and the "learnings" associated with it may be rapid in both acquisition and extinction.

In discussions with teachers concerning the distinction between what is educative and what is exciting, it is often assumed that I recommend giving children practice in boredom! Far from it! All children inevitably get some practice at coping with boredom; to provide such practice as a matter of policy would be sadistic. In this connection it may be useful to point out that there are two variables involved in this discussion. One variable is level of responsiveness defined by excitement at one extreme and depression at the other. Another variable may be called interest with involvement or absorption at one extreme and boredom or apathy at the other. It is difficult to persuade teachers that we are not really caught between the extremes of excitement and depression.

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Sustained interest, involvement or absorption--with occasional fluctuations in terms of satisfaction and pleasure--are qualitatively different from excitement and depression. A useful analogy (for this observer) may be made by drawing a distinction between the music of Tschaikowsky and Bach. The former is delightful and moving from time to time. The "Nutcracker Suite," once or twice a year, is enjoyable. More often than that it might lose its charm and ability to move us. But good Bach may be heard frequently; on each occasion pleasure is enhanced, fresh nuances and meanings may be enjoyed. The quality of constrained passion is among its many assets.

Implications of the Excitement Problem for Educational Change

Like many other problems in education, the educative/excitement confusion reflects a pervasive problem in the wider culture and society. We seem to live in an excitement and cheap-thrill oriented culture. Note how often you hear the "exciting" descriptor in advertising pitches and in ordinary daily conversations. To a large extent, strategies for educational change, reform, and innovation are also aimed at getting decision makers as well as practitioners excited about new ideas, programs, technologies, and materials. Much pressure is exerted on teachers to adopt new, exciting practices and procedures. My hunch is that this hard setting (typically overselling) is followed (at point D in Figure 1) by both disillusionment and mistrust among oversold adopters. It sometimes seems that in order to overcome the disillusionment and mistrust from previous disappointments, the change agents make bigger and bigger promises and omit more and more precautions and contraindicators. If educational practitioners are treated as consumers (perhaps as the proverbial suckers), they may learn to expect to be sold solutions and gimmicks-bags of tricks! Such an expectation may block teachers' alternative learnings, e.g. to be resourceful, thoughtful, patient,

persistent in the face of educational problems, etc.). The two dispositions, to be consumers of solutions and to be originators of solutions, may be examples of the incompatible responses we read about in contemporary learning studies in educational psychology journals.

Too many articles in recent publications give educational reform and innovation a kind of soap opera quality (see Katz and Krasnow, 1973). My hunch is that the spectacular success stories offered in educational dissemination materials are often misleading. They remind me of the television series in which doctors and lawyers are portrayed as living from one peak experience (open hearts to breaking hearts) after another! Yet, the health of a real community is actually maintained by the physician who administers vaccinations, booster shots, and looks at sore throats--perhaps a hundred a week. Surely that is not exciting. Perhaps a relevant factor to consider here is that such routine procedures as looking at sore throats must be performed alertly on each occasion in order not to miss potentially significant signs of serious pathology.

The ability to perform routine procedures alertly suggests that a part of the distinction I am trying to make between what is educative and what is exciting concerns the pattern of mobilization of energy. Excitement connotes high bursts of energy release with rapid depletion. A steady energy output over longer periods of time seems to be called for in any task or study involving complex ideas, concepts or lines of inquiry. The opportunity to cultivate the ability to manage energy in this steady way probably should be provided early in childhood.

Summary

I have suggested that educators of young children are often both the perpetrators and the victims of a culture-wide confusion between what is

educative and what is exciting. It seems to me that teachers who feel pressured to keep children excited have to fail in the long run. I believe that when we bombard children with too many exciting activities and television programs (plus elaborate and gimmicky toys) we teach them to expect, if not to need, to be excited. At the same time, however, we cheat them of the opportunity to learn to gain satisfaction from sustained involvement and effort. The real challenge to teachers, as I see it, is to develop activities that children will find satisfying over a long period of time rather than momentarily exciting--the kinds of activities that invite genuine and appropriate problem solving, mastery of the difficult, and concentration or absorption, and that even may be a little routine.

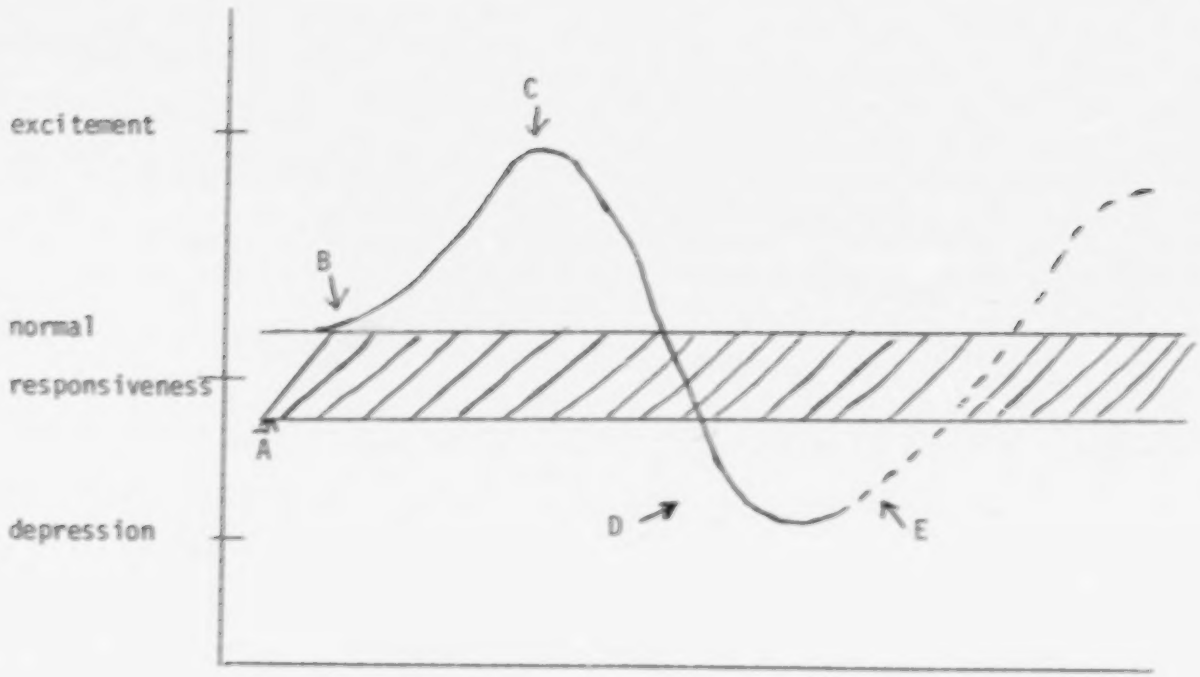

Figure 1: Schematic Representation of Changes in Responsiveness

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Postscript

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